The Lepers of Molokai

BY JACK LONDON.

THE FIRST LETTER IN THE IMPORTANT SERIES OF FIRST-HAND IMPRESSIONS FOR WHICH THE COMPANION HAS SENT MR. LONDON AROUND THE WORLD.

When the Snark sailed along the windward coast of Molokai, on her way to Honolulu, I looked at the chart, then pointed to a low-lying peninsula backed by a tremendous cliff varying from two to four thousand feet in height, and said, "The pit of hell, the most cursed place on earth." I should have been shocked, if at that moment I could have caught a vision of myself a month later, ashore in the most accursed place on earth, and having a disgracefully good time along with eight hundred of the lepers who were likewise having a good time. Their good time was not disgraceful; but mine was, for in the midst of so much misery it was not meet for me to have a good time. That is the way I felt about it, and my only excuse is that I couldn't help having a good time.

For instance, in the afternoon of the Fourth of July all the lepers gathered at the race track for the sports. I had wandered away from the Superintendent and the physicians in order to get a snapshot of the finish of one of the races. It was an interesting race, and partizanship ran high. Three horses were entered—one ridden by a Chinese, one by a Hawaiian and one by a Portuguese boy. All three riders were lepers; so were the judges and the crowd. The race was twice around the track. The Chinese and the Hawaiian got away together and rode neck and neck, the Portuguese boy toiling along two hundred feet behind. Around they went in the same positions. Half way around on the second and final lap the Chinese pulled away and got one length ahead of the Hawaiian. At the same time the Portuguese boy was beginning to crawl up. But it looked hopeless. The crowd went wild. All the lepers were passionate lovers of horse flesh. The Portuguese boy crawled nearer and nearer. I went wild, too. They were on the home stretch. The Portuguese boy passed the Hawaiian. There was a thunder of hoofs, a rush of the three horses bunched together, the jockeys plying their whips, and every last onlooker bursting his throat, or hers, with shouts and yells. Nearer, nearer, inch by inch, the Portuguese boy crept up, and passed, yes, passed, winning by a head from the Chinese. I came to myself in a group of lepers. They were yelling, tossing their hats, and dancing around like fiends. So was I. When I came to I was waving my hat and murmuring ecstatically, "By golly, the boy wins! The boy wins!"

I tried to check myself. I assured myself that I was witnessing one of the horrors of Molokai, and that it was shameful for me, under such circumstances, to be so light hearted and light headed. But it was no use. The next event was a donkey race, and it was just starting; so was the fun. The last donkey in was to win the race, and what complicated the affair was that no rider rode his own donkey. They rode one another's donkeys, the result of which was that each man strove to make the donkey he rode beat his own donkey ridden by some one else. Naturally, only men possessing very slow or extremely obstreperous donkeys had entered them for the race. One donkey had been trained to tuck in its legs and lie down whenever its rider touched its sides with his heels. Some donkeys strove to turn around and come back; others developed a penchant for the side of the track, where they stuck their heads over the railing and stopped, while all of them dawdled. Half way around the track one donkey got into an argument with its rider. When all the rest of the donkeys had crossed the wire, that particular donkey was still arguing. He won the race, though his rider lost it and came in on foot. And all the while nearly a thousand lepers were laughing uproariously at the fun. Anybody in my place would have joined with them in having a good time.

All the foregoing is by way of preamble to the statement that the horrors of Molokai, as they have been painted in the past, do not exist. The Settlement has been written up repeatedly by sensationalists, and usually by sensationalists who have never laid eyes on it. Of course, leprosy is leprosy, and it is a terrible thing; but so much that is sensational has been written about Molokai, that neither the lepers nor those who devote their lives to them have received a fair deal. Here is a case in point: A newspaper writer, who, of course, had never been near the Settlement, vividly described Superintendent McVeigh's crouching in a grass hut and being besieged nightly by starving lepers on their knees, wailing for food. This hair-raising account was copied by the press all over the United States, and was the cause of many indignant and protesting editorials. Well, I lived and slept for five days in Mr. McVeigh's grass hut (which was a comfortable wooden cottage, by the way; and there isn't a grass house in the whole Settlement), and I heard the lepers wailing for food—only the wailing was peculiarly harmonious and rhythmic, and it was accompanied by the music of stringed instruments, violins, guitars, ukuleles and banjos. Also, the wail was of various sorts. The leper brass band wailed, and two singing societies wailed, and lastly a quintet of excellent voices wailed. So much for a lie that should never have been printed. The wailing was the serenade which the glee clubs always give Mr. McVeigh whenever he returns from a trip to Honolulu.

Leprosy is not so contagious as is imagined. I went for a week's visit to the Settlement, and I took my wife along—all of which would have not happened had we had any apprehension of contracting the disease. Nor did we wear long, gauntleted gloves and keep apart from the lepers. On the contrary we mingled freely with them, and before we left knew scores of them by sight and name. The precautions of simple cleanliness seem to be all that is necessary. On returning to their own houses, after having been among and handling lepers, the non-lepers, such as the physicians and the superintendent, merely wash their faces and hands with mildly antiseptic soap and change their coats.

That a leper is unclean, however, should be insisted upon; and the segregation of lepers, from what little is known of the disease, should be rigidly maintained. On the other hand, the awful horror with which the leper has been regarded in the past, and the frightful treatment he has received, have been unnecessary and cruel. In order to dispel some of the popular misapprehensions of leprosy, I want to tell something of the relations between the lepers and non-lepers as I observed them at Molokai. On the morning after our arrival, Mrs. London and I attended a shoot of the Kaulapapa Rifle Club, and caught our first glimpse of the democracy of attention and alleviation that obtains. The Club was just beginning a prize shoot for a cup put up by Mr. McVeigh, who is also a member of the club, as also are Doctor Goodhue and Doctor Hollman, the resident physicians (who, by the way, live in the Settlement with their wives). All about us, in the shooting booth, were the lepers. Lepers and non-lepers were using the same guns, and all were rubbing shoulders in the confined space. The majority of the lepers were Hawaiians. Sitting beside me on a bench was a Norwegian. Directly in front of me, in the stand, was an American, a veteran of the Civil War, who had fought on the Confederate side. He was sixty-five years of age, but that did not prevent him from running up a good score. Strapping Hawaiian policemen, lepers, khaki clad, were also shooting, as were Portuguese, Chinese and kokuas. The latter are native helpers in the Settlement, who are non-lepers. And on the afternoon that Mrs. London and I climbed the two-thousand-foot pali and looked our last upon the Settlement, the superintendent, the doctors, and the mixture of nationalities and of diseased and non-diseased were all engaged in an exciting baseball game.

Not so was the leper and his greatly misunderstood and feared disease treated during the Middle Ages in Europe. At that time the leper was considered legally and politically dead. He was placed in a funeral procession, and led to the church, where the burial service was read over him by the officiating clergyman. Then a spadeful of earth was dropped upon his chest and he was dead—living dead. While this rigorous treatment was largely unnecessary, nevertheless one thing was learned by it. Leprosy was unknown in Europe until it was introduced by the returning Crusaders, whereupon it spread slowly, until it had seized upon large numbers of the people. Obviously, it was a disease that could be contracted by contact. It was a contagion and it was equally obvious that it could be eradicated by segregation. Terrible and monstrous as was the treatment of the leper in those days, the great lesson of segregation was learned. By its means leprosy was stamped out.

And by the same means leprosy is even now decreasing in the Hawaiian Islands. But the segregation of the lepers on Molokai is not the horrible nightmare that has been so often exploited by yellow writers. In the first place, the leper is not torn ruthlessly from his family. When a suspect is discovered, he is invited by the Board of Health to come to the Kalihi Receiving Station at Honolulu. His fare and all his expenses are paid for him. He is first passed upon, by microscopical examination, by the bacteriologist of the Board of Health. If the bacilli leprae are found, the patient is examined by the Board of Examining Physicians, five in number. If found by them to be a leper, he is so declared, which finding is later officially confirmed by the Board of Health, and the leper is ordered sent to Molokai. Furthermore, during the thorough trial that is given his case, the patient has the right to be represented by a physician, whom he can select and employ for himself. Nor, after having been declared a leper, is the patient immediately rushed off to Molokai. He is given ample time—weeks, and even months, sometimes—during which he stays at Kalihi and winds up or arranges all his business affairs. At Molokai, in turn, he may be visited by his relatives, business agent, etc., though they are not permitted to eat and sleep in his house. Visitors' houses, kept "clean," are maintained for this purpose.

I saw an illustration of the thorough trial given the suspect, when I visited Kalihi with Mr. Pinkham, President of the Board of Health. The suspect was a Hawaiian, seventy years of age, who for thirty-four years had worked in Honolulu as a pressman in a printing office. The bacteriologist had decided that he was a leper, the Examining Board had been unable to make up its mind and that day all had come out for another examination.

When at Molokai, the declared leper has the privilege of re-examination, and patients are continually coming back to Honolulu for that purpose. The steamer that took me to Molokai had on board two returning lepers, both young women, one of whom had come to Honolulu to settle up some property she owned, and the other had come to Honolulu to see her sick mother. Both had been at Kalihi for a month.

The Settlement of Molokai enjoys a far more delightful climate than even Honolulu, being situated on the windward side of the island, in the path of the fresh northeast trades. The scenery is magnificent; on one side is the blue sea, on the other the wonderful wall of the pali, receding here and there into beautiful mountain valleys. Everywhere are grassy pastures, over which roam the hundreds of horses which are owned by the lepers. Some of them have their own carts, rigs and traps. In the little harbor of Kalaupapa lie fishing boats and a steam launch, all of which are privately owned and operated by lepers. Their bounds upon the sea are of course determined, otherwise no restriction is put upon their seafaring. Their fish they sell to the Board of Health, and the money they receive is their own. While I was there, one night's catch was four thousand pounds.

And as these men fish, others farm. All trades are followed. One leper, a pure Hawaiian, is the boss painter. He employs eight men, and takes contracts for painting buildings from the Board of Health. He is a member of the Kalaupapa Rifle Club, where I met him, and I must confess that he was far better dressed than I. Another man, similarly situated, is the boss carpenter. Then, in addition to the Board of Health store, there are little privately owned stores, where those with shopkeeper's souls may exercise their peculiar instincts. The assistant superintendent, Mr. Walamau, a finely educated and able man, is a pure Hawaiian and a leper. Mr. Bartlett, who is the present storekeeper, is an American who was in business in Honolulu before he was struck down by the disease. All that these men earn is that much in their own pockets. If they do not work they are taken care of anyway by the Territory, given food, shelter, clothes and medical attendance. The Board of Health carries on agriculture, stock raising and dairying for local use, and employment at fair wages is furnished to all who wish to work. They are not compelled to work, however, for they are wards of the Territory. For the young, and the very old, and the helpless, there are homes and hospitals.

Major Lee, an American and long a marine engineer for the Inter-Island Steamship Company, I met actively at work in the new steam laundry, where he was busy installing the machinery. I met him afterward, and one day he said to me:

"Give us a good breeze about how we live here. For heaven's sake write us up straight. Put your foot down on this chamber-of-horrors rot and all the rest of it. We don't like being misrepresented. We've got some feelings. Just tell the world how we really are in here."

Man after man that I met in the Settlement, and woman after woman, in one way or another expressed the same sentiment. It was patent that they resented bitterly the sensational and untruthful way in which they have been exploited in the past.

In spite of the fact that they are afflicted by disease, the lepers form a happy colony, divided into two villages and numerous country and seaside homes, of nearly a thousand souls. They have six churches, a Young Men's Christian Association building, several assembly halls, a band stand, a race track, baseball grounds and shooting ranges, an athletic club, numerous glee clubs, and two brass bands.

"They are so contented down there," Mr. Pinkham told me, "that you can't drive them away with a shotgun."

This I later verified for myself. In January of this year eleven of the lepers, on whom the disease, after having committed certain ravages, showed no further signs of activity, were brought back to Honolulu for re-examination. They were loath to come, and on being asked whether or not they wanted to go free if found clean of leprosy, one and all answered, "Back to Molokai."

In the old days, before the discovery of the leprosy bacillus, a small number of men and women, suffering from various and totally different diseases, were adjudged lepers and sent to Molokai. Years afterward they suffered great consternation when the bacteriologist declared that they were not afflicted with leprosy, and never had been. They fought against being sent away from Molokai, and in one way or another, as helpers and nurses, they got jobs from the Board of Health and remained. The present jailer is one of these men. Declared to be a non-leper, he accepted, on salary, the charge of the jail, in order to escape being sent away.

At the present moment, in Honolulu, is a bootblack. He is an American negro. Mr. McVeigh told me about him. Long ago, before the bacteriological tests, he was sent to Molokai as a leper. As a ward of the state he developed a superlative degree of independence and fomented much petty mischief. And then one day, after having been for years a perennial source of minor annoyances, the bacteriological test was applied and he was declared a non-leper.

"Ah, ha!" chortled Mr. McVeigh. "Now I've got you. Out you go on the next steamer, and good riddance!"

But the negro didn't want to go. Immediately he married an old woman in the last stages of leprosy, and began petitioning the Board of Health for permission to remain and nurse his sick wife. There was no one, he said pathetically, who could take care of his poor wife as well as he could. But they saw through his game, and he was deported on the steamer and given the freedom of the world. But he preferred Molokai. Landing on the leeward side of Molokai, he sneaked down the pali one night and took up his abode in the Settlement. He was apprehended, tried, and convicted of trespass, sentenced to pay a small fine, and again deported on the steamer, with the warning that if he trespassed again he would be fined one hundred dollars and be sent to prison in Honolulu. And now, when Mr. McVeigh comes up to Honolulu, the bootblack shines his shoes for him, and says:

"Say, boss, I lost a good home down there. Yes, sir, I lost a good home." Then his voice sinks to a confidential whisper as he says, "Say, boss, can't I go back? Can't you fix it for me so as I can go back?"

As regards the fear of leprosy itself, nowhere in the Settlement among lepers or non-lepers did I see any sign of it. The chief horror of leprosy obtains in the minds of those who have never seen a leper and who do not know anything about the disease. At the hotel at Waikiki a lady expressed shuddering amazement at my having the hardihood to pay a visit to the Settlement. On talking with her I learned that she had been born in Honolulu, had lived there all her life, and had never laid eyes on a leper.

Leprosy is terrible, there is no getting away from that, but from what little I know of the disease and its degree of contagiousness, I would by far prefer to spend the rest of my days in Molokai than in any tuberculosis sanatorium. In every city and county hospital for poor people in the United States, or in similar institutions in other countries, sights as terrible as those in Molokai can be witnessed, and the sum total of these sights is vastly more terrible. For that matter, if it were given me to choose between being compelled to live in Molokai for the rest of my life, or in the East End of London, the East Side of New York, or the Stock Yards of Chicago, I would select Molokai without debate.

In Molokai the people are happy. I shall never forget the celebration of the Fourth of July I witnessed there. At six o'clock in the morning the "horribles" were out, dressed fantastically, astride horses, mules and donkeys (their own property), and cutting capers all over the Settlement. Two brass bands were out as well. Then there were the pa-u riders, thirty or forty of them, Hawaiian women all, superb horsewomen, dressed gorgeously in the old, native riding costume, and dashing about in twos and threes and groups. In the afternoon Mrs. London and I stood in the judges' stand and awarded the prizes for horsemanship and costume to the pa-u riders. All about were the hundreds of lepers, with wreaths of flowers on heads and necks and shoulders, looking on and making merry. And always, over the brows of hills and across the grassy level stretches, appearing and disappearing, were the groups of men and women, gaily dressed, on galloping horses, horses and riders flower bedecked and flower garlanded, singing and laughing and riding like the wind. And as I stood in the judges' stand and looked at all this, there came to my recollection the lazar house of Havana, where I had once beheld some two hundred lepers, prisoners inside four restricted walls until they died. No, there are a few thousand places I wot of in this world over which I would select Molokai as a place of permanent residence. In the evening we went to one of the leper assembly halls, where, before a crowded audience, the singing societies contested for prizes, and where the night wound up with a dance.

One thing is certain. The leper in the Settlement is far better off than the leper who lies in hiding outside. Such a leper is a lonely outcast, living in constant fear of discovery and slowly and surely rotting away. The action of leprosy is not steady. It lays hold of its victim, commits a ravage, and then lies dormant for an indeterminate period. It may not commit another ravage for five years, or ten years, or forty years, and the patient may enjoy uninterrupted good health. Rarely, however, do these first ravages cease of themselves. The skilled surgeon is required, and the skilled surgeon cannot be called in for the leper who is in hiding. For instance, the first ravage may take the form of a perforating ulcer in the sole of the foot. When the bone is reached, necrosis sets in. If the leper is in hiding, he cannot be operated upon, the necrosis will continue to eat its way up the bone of the leg, and in a brief and horrible time that leper will die of gangrene or some other terrible complication. On the other hand, if that same leper is in Molokai, the surgeon will operate upon the foot, remove the ulcer, cleanse the bone, and put a complete stop to that particular ravage of the disease. A month after the operation the leper will be out riding horseback, running foot races, swimming in the breakers, or climbing the giddy sides of the valleys.

The old horrors of leprosy go back to the conditions that obtained before the days of antiseptic surgery, and before the time when physicians like Doctor Goodhue and Doctor Hollmann went to live at the Settlement. Doctor Goodhue is the pioneer surgeon there, and too much praise cannot be given him for the noble work he has done. I spent one morning in the operating room with him, and of the three operations he performed, two were on men, new-comers, who had arrived on the same steamer with me. In each case the disease had attacked in one spot only. One man had a perforating ulcer in the ankle, well advanced, and the other man was suffering from a similar affliction, well advanced, under his arm. Both cases were well advanced because the men had been on the outside and had not been treated. In each case Doctor Goodhue put an immediate and complete stop to the ravage, and in four weeks those two men will be as well and able bodied as they ever were in their lives, the only difference between them and you or me being that the disease is lying dormant in their bodies and may at any future time commit another ravage.

Leprosy is as old as history. References to it are found in the earliest written records. And yet today practically nothing more is known about it than was known then. This much was known then—namely, that it was contagious and that those afflicted by it should be segregated. The difference between then and now is that today the leper is more rigidly segregated and more humanely treated. But leprosy itself still remains the same awful and profound mystery. A reading of the reports of the physicians and specialists of all countries reveals the baffling nature of the disease. These leprosy specialists are unanimous on no one phase of the disease. They do not know.

They are baffled in the discovery of a serum wherewith to fight the disease. And in all their work, as yet, they have found no clue, no cure. Sometimes there have been blazes of hope, theories of causation and much-heralded cures, but every time the darkness of failure quenched the flame. A doctor insists that the cause of leprosy is a long-continued fish diet, and he proves his theory voluminously till a physician from the highlands of India demands why the natives of that district should therefore be afflicted by leprosy when they have never eaten fish, nor all the generations of their fathers before them. A man treats a leper with a certain kind of oil or

(Continued on Page Six.)

LEPER SETTLEMENT AT KALAWAO.